

RECOLLECTIONS OF OLDEN TIMES

BY
FRANK G. BATES

The States of New England, politically considered, are aggregations of Towns. In their social and religious relations, however, the populations of these towns differed somewhat widely from those of the neighboring states. Such differences are, however, chiefly due to the individualism and heterodoxy prevailing in them in colonial days and in the immediately succeeding generations. These traits contrasted in marked degree from those prevailing in adjoining colonies. In those colonies, social and religious life centered about the village green, overlooked by a dominant meeting house of an officially recognized faith. In Rhode Island no such unifying force existed as a center upon which community life was based. The lack of such a dominant factor in community life was the penalty which Rhode Island has paid throughout its history for that "soul liberty" so highly valued, but which is equally now enjoyed in all states alike.

Along with other evidences of town pride and consciousness of unity, the development of local historical societies has made slow progress. The Western Rhode Island Historical Society is making a most commendable effort to arouse in a group of rural towns, a consciousness, if not of individual towns, at least in a group of towns, a consciousness of local unity where hitherto there existed slight awareness of common interests. To the promotion of this movement and its ultimate success, the coming of the automobile and the State Highway system have contributed their share.

Inevitably, however, there did develop centers of community life, in rural as well as in urban communities. However, these centers did not develop about village "Greens" or under the shadow of an officially recognized and ecclesiastically dominant church. Frequently they grew up about a tavern or a country store, the two often being synonymous, or even, in Rhode Island, about a church of heterodox persuasion.

Soon after the opening of the nineteenth century, some of these centers or, frequently new ones, were clustered about the little cotton mills which began to dot the country-side along the streams. In another generation some such centers were assisted by the coming of the railroad. These, both new and old, usually were permeated by a rural flavor. Some such centers were acquiring specific names, sometimes even now applied to them. Of some of these even the name has been forgotten, or exists only in the memory of the older generation. Some of them were designations no more precise than the "this", or "that" neighborhood.

In almost every town a certain number of such spots or areas still retain certain designations which are now seldom heard save, perhaps, from the lips of the old residents.

Among such older names now less often heard are: in West Greenwich, Sharp Street, Escobacag, Congdon's Mills, Liberty and the "Plains". The latter situated in a somewhat remote location, distant from the geographical center, was re-christened by the postal authorities, "West Greenwich Center". In Foster, there were: Mt. Vernon, Mocsup Valley, The Plains, on the State line, Hopkins Mills, which lies in the northern part of the town, but was re-christened "South Foster" by Washington decree, and Hemlock, now rejoicing in the name of Foster Center. In Scituate was to be found even a longer list, in which we find some names reminiscent of old manufacturing establishments. Of these, the older ones may recall, Richmond, Pongansett, Ashland, Saundersville, Glen Rock, Elmdale, Harrisdale and Kent. At least four of these were eliminated by the construction of the Providence water-works. Again, in Coventry, there were Hopkins Hollow, Rice City, Spring Lake and Nipmuc. The discontinuance of rail passenger facilities and the post office has been hurrying Summit onward toward a similar fate.

On rural grouping of population in the town of Coventry which, on account of its somewhat nebulous character, perhaps, or the fact of its not having, throughout its whole existence, retained a continuous name, was that which was in its best days known as the Elder Stone Meeting house Neighborhood. This community, during the first century of its existence, played a not unimportant position in town affairs.

This neighborhood came before the middle of the nineteenth century, to be often spoken of as the "Town House Neighborhood", and later as Potterville, and, in still more recent days, as Maple Valley.

The old meeting-house which gave its name to the somewhat straggling neighborhood, stood by the side of the old "North Road" of Coventry at the point where a side road branched off to the southward and leading to a settlement known then and for a time afterwards as "The Shoethread", and later as "Central" and finally as "Coventry Center". The old Meeting-house has long disappeared. The only reminder of it in my childhood days was the neighboring cemetery which, at that period, had become a dense thicket of scrub-oaks. I am told however, that in later years the thicket has been cleared away and the yard made accessible to visitors.

This neighborhood stretched along the old North Road from a point somewhat to the westward of the Town Farm, westerly to a point in the vicinity of where the "Biscuit Hill" road turned off and not far from the old "Nigger Sawmill", and likewise for certain distances along the roads diverging to the Southward.

This neighborhood happened to be that wherein were born and reared some generations of both the maternal and paternal ancestors of the writer and, hence, has acquired a special interest for him.

In this neighborhood was born and reared by maternal grandmother, Cynthia Bowen Wright and her elder sister, Abigail Burlingame Wright. Cynthia Wright married Levi Matteson of the Maple Root neighborhood, while Abigail married Isreal Wilson. Wilson succeeding in turn his grandfather and his father, operated a fulling and carding mill at the outlet of Quidnick Pond. Mother's uncle and aunt having no children, my mother became from early childhood a member of their household.

There in the "new" Wilson house, erected in 1815, I, being somewhat remote from children of my own age, listened, seemingly hours and days, to reminiscence of the families who had lived in the Meeting-house Vicinity in the earlier years of the nineteenth century and earlier. Told and retold were reminiscences of families of days then long past. Likewise were displayed relics of those same old times. But, like children of similar age, few questions were asked by the listening child. Consequently present reminiscences must be scattered and disconnected, and centering about people whom the listener had never seen. The places mentioned, however, still stood within my early recollection. Such memories may, perhaps, best be set in order by following along the several highways which radiate from the old meeting-house much as they did in earlier days.

So, following the old North Road, omitting such dwellings as were of later construction, one came to within a few rods, to the corner of the "Hope Furnace Road" branching off North-eastward. This road soon entered what was known as the "Furnace Woods", with but few houses until the town line was reached. This road, as its name signified, led to "Hope Furnace", and thence on toward Providence. It was along this road that, in Revolutionary days, rumbled the stream of ox-wagons bearing to the Hope Furnace fuel to stoke the fires which were casting cannon balls to be hurled against the British troops about Narragansett Bay.

At the point where the "Furnace Road" diverged from the "North Road", stood, after the year 1835, the "Old Town House", which served as the place of holding town meetings, but likewise, after the old church was gone, as a place of holding religious services.

Hence continuing from the future site of the Town House westward but a short distance, one reaches the "Waterman Tavern", a famous hostelry of the old times. This tavern, of somewhat imposing dimensions for those days, and still standing, was a famous stopping place for travellers on their way from Providence and the east to Norwich and points beyond. In the big field across the highway was the French Camp-Ground where, in Revolutionary days, soldiers were, on various occasions, encamped, while their officers found entertainment in the tavern. In later times there was pointed out a gash in the edge of a mantle piece, made, it was alleged, by a French officer in an encounter there with a fellow officer while encamped there. There is to be seen yet, in the middle of the field, a well dug for the accommodation of the soldiers encamped there.

On more than one occasion I have heard my mother rehearse, as told to her by her grandmother, the story of how, on one occasion, she was taken to visit the encampment of a French army there. That occasion must have been in early November, 1782, when Rochambeau's army was, after Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown, in the previous year, marching to its Winter quarters in Providence. It was at the Waterman Tavern that town meetings were frequently held down to the erection of the nearby Town House, in 1835.

Continuing along the road as it approached lower ground, a side road led off to the southward. Turning for a moment to follow this road, one came first, after crossing an old bridge over Flat River, to a great gambrelled house on the hill, the home of William Stone, father of William A. Stone, a well known auctioneer of the later part of the nineteenth century.

In my childhood days this house was occupied by "Susie" Phillips. Further on one came to the older home of Mrs. Phillips. Thence the road led on, through a densely wooded district to a forking of the road. Taking there the right-hand fork, one was led to the Spruce school house, the predecessor of the Summit school house, and into Scott Hollow. Following the left-hand road at the above mentioned forking, the now abandoned road led on through the woods ultimately to join the "Harkney Hill Road", near the corner of Quidnick Pond.

To be concluded

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Returning now to the corner where this excursion southward had left the "North Road", there stood, under a big tree, the home of Alexander Hammett. Until well within my recollection Mr. Hammett, born in 1799, still occupied this house. He was the son of John and Isabel (Stone) Hammett. They had a son John, a publisher or book-seller, in Boston, and an unmarried daughter, Phebe.

With the death of the daughter, Phebe, the name of Hammett disappeared from Coventry.

Proceeding westward along the main road, one came to the most thickly populated stretch of the highway, the portion which in my early years was known as Potterville. On the right, near the brook stood the Whaley School House, and at least three dwellings on the north side of the highway. One of these was, within my recollection, the home of Thomas Whaley, another by a Mrs. Potter and still another by an ancient negro.

On the opposite side of the road, as one ascended from the crossing of the brook, stood a house with high basement, built a century and a half ago, by my great grandfather for his eldest son, Nathan Wright. Its later occupants I do not recall.

Next was a lane turning southward to reach a saw-mill and a bobbin factory, where wooden bobbins were made for the use of cotton factories. These were, in my early years operated by one Potter. Hence the blossoming of the name, Potterville. Beyond the entrance to the lane stood what was popularly known as the "long house". This structure was erected for the accommodations of operatives of the wood-working concerns, and included three tenements.

In one of the houses in the Potterville group, but I do not recall which, dwelt the most well-to-do citizen perhaps of Coventry, Jonathan Whaley. He, it was who donated to the town the land upon which the Town House was erected. The thrifty donor of the land reserved, in the deed of gift, only the right to collect and convert to his own use, whatever removable traces remained of the many horses tethered during the day-long town meetings on the town house lot.

A few rods beyond the group of houses which constituted "Potterville", another road turned off to the South. After crossing the diminutive Flat River, one came, on this side-road, to the home of Artemus Stone. Opposite this, on the brook, sometimes spoken of as Spruce Brook, stood the sawmill of the aforesaid Stone. Next, and to the southward, was a bobbin-shop operated at my earliest recollection, by Albert Cahoon. At a later date this privilege was occupied by an establishment wherein John Scott operated a mill wherein were ground "paint-skins", to be used for caulking purposes.

Next came the home of Almond Cahoon and, further on, a house, known as the "Rouse" place, occupied in my early days by Nicholas Scott. Passing the vestiges of an old house on what old people called the "Sweet" lot, one came to the corner of the road. The two turnings, east and west, in the present century, incorporated with the "state road". Here, on the northwest corner, stood the Spruce school-house, which was supplanted in the period of the Civil War or soon thereafter, by the Summit school-house, which has been superseded in turn by the modern graded school.

Resuming our progress westward on the North Road from a high banked and stonewalled cemetery, one came quickly to the early home of Dr. Olney, the highly respected physician of the community, and later, for a time occupied by the Reverend Samuel Arnold and wife Juliet, the daughter of Dr. Olney. Nearby was passed the home of Philip and Benoni Havens. Farther on stood a group of houses and a grist mill operated by Olney Matteson and subsequently by his son George. Across the stream stood a house occupied by Wardwell Matteson. Almost opposite the Matteson grist-mill a road turned away to the north leading to Clayville.

But a very short distance beyond, but scarcely to be included in this chronicle, the "Biscuit Hill Road" led off to the north-west toward Mt. Vernon. Near the divergence of this highway stood in early days the old "Nigger Saw-Mill", at the entrance to a large forested area. This forest area was an inheritance from Jonathan Whaley to his daughter Eleanor Goff, and was the tract donated by George B. Parker to the Rhode Island Audubon Society.

Returning to the site of the old Meeting house once more, to follow the southward-turning road, the first house on the left, and below the bridge over Flat River, was that which, in early days was the home of Daniel Burlingame, and, at a later date, of his son Esek. It was an ancient structure, with a high gambrelled roof and immense stone chimney. The house was still standing until perhaps the opening of the present century, when destroyed by fire.

Crossing the river, there stood also on the left, a house given, together with farm land, by Esek Burlingame, to his daughter Lucy and her husband Samuel Wright a native of the town of Glocester. Samuel and Lucy Wright were the Great Grandparents of the writer, and the parents of my grandmother, Cynthia Wright, and of her sister Abigail Wilson, wife of Isreal Wilson, earlier noted, of the Quidnick Pond neighborhood.

In the year 1825, Samuel Wright, a somewhat extensive dealer in lumber, became bankrupt, a victim of the unwise business practices which culminated in the wide-spread business collapse of 1826. Consequently the farm passed out of the ownership of the Wright-Burlingame family at that time. The original house was destroyed at some later date by fire. The house which replaced it was, in my childhood days, occupied by Amos Franklin. The wife of Amos Franklin was the daughter of the Reverend Samuel Arnold and his wife, Juliet Olney, earlier mentioned.

On the opposite side of the highway was the home of Asa Stone. Asa Stone and his wife Phebe Greene, had three children, John, Lowry and Lydia. Asa Stone had, just up-stream from the bridge, a small water privilege. In the later years of the last century, Pardon Peckham of Coventry Center, conceived the idea of improvement here, by the erection of a higher dam which would cause the overflowing of certain land upstream. Although the Peckham project was not carried to consummation, it led to a long-drawn-out law suit instituted by one Isreal Stone, who lived on a farm on the south side of the river, upstream, alleging that irreparable damage would arise from the proposed flowage. Although the Peckham scheme of developing additional water-power was never carried out, it was, for years, a perennial in the courts, as well as a neighborhood topic of conversation.

At some distance further down the road, upon the right, stood the home of the Goff family. About the year 1800, Daniel Goff married Isabella Hammett. They had children, Raymond P., and Elizabeth. Raymond P. married Eleanor, daughter of Jonathan Whaley, and they in turn had a son, Albert. Albert remained unmarried. Raymond P. and family, removed in later life, to Coventry Center, but Mrs. Goff, after the death of husband and son, returned to the old home, overlooking the Flat River Reservoir, not far from Coventry Center.

Returning, now, for the last time, to the North Road, at the old church site, and proceeding Eastward one found the houses somewhat scattering.

First in this direction and on the north side of the road, stood, in my childhood, the house of Horatio Cook. Although the Cooks were intimate friends of our family, I seem never to have learned much about the family. Somewhat farther along was the home of Mrs. Goodspeed, of whom I recall nothing beyond the name. Continuing eastward, the next dwelling was the Salisbury home. Here, at the crossing of the Salisbury Brook, was a sawmill, operated in the middle of the nineteenth century by Gilbert Salisbury, and later by his son, Erastus, who, later, became an inhabitant of Anthony. Of the later occupants of these premises I know nothing.

A short distance onward, on the right, stood the home of Amasa Ralph. This farm was sold to the Flat River Reservoir Company when the Flat River Reservoir was constructed, and the Ralph family moved to Washington village. For many years Horace, son of Amasa, operated a wagon shop near the head of Main Street in that village.

Opposite the old Ralph house there is, or used to be, a gate, through which passed a private road leading northward to the site of the farmhouse of the old King, and later the Bates family. Thereon rested in succession two Ebenezer Kings, father and son, the last being succeeded by his son Jesse. Jesse, having no sons, the farm passes to his daughter Christine, who married Benoni Bates, a native of the vicinity of Kent in Scituate. On that old farm was born to Benoni and Christine as son, Solomon Bates. Solomon married Elsie Nichols. Four sons were born to them: Caleb Greene, Benoni, Mason Arnold and Albert Henry. The eldest of these married Frances Matteson, already referred to as the foster-daughter of the Wilsons of Quidnick Pond.

Near the close of the Civil War, the farm was sold to Philip Johnson, a relative of the writer's grandfather, Solomon, and father of Mrs. Zilpha Foster, the recent benefactress of the Western Rhode Island Historical Society. The whole Bates family removed to Windham, Connecticut. Soon afterwards Caleb and his wife Sally, returned to Rhode Island, and ultimately to the Wilson homestead, at Quidnick Pond.

This is brought to a close the very imperfect story of a Rhode Island country neighborhood, which the writer has scarcely visited in the last forty years. The facts therein brought together have been gathered from tales once told from the lips of those long since departed, supplemented from the recollections of the writer, and further supplemented by occasional references to the "Vital Records of Rhode Island", collected by the writer's old friend, James N. Arnold, and to the Beers "Atlas of Rhode Island", of 1870.